

REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: THE DISTINCTION BIAS

SHORT DESCRIPTION

WHAT:

The distinction bias reflects the binary brain's focus on differences rather than similarities. We see differences far more than we see similarities, even when comparing very similar things.

PROBLEM:

Focusing on exaggerated and in some cases irrelevant differences can lead to serious misperceptions and thinking based more on stereotypes than reality. This can seriously influence perception and lead to poor judgments and actions.

SOLUTION:

The lesson and meditation will not only help you understand how the binary brain compares things and the costs of doing so, they will make your decision-making and choices more informed by relevant details not simplistic mental shortcuts.



One of the drivers of binary thinking is the fact that the brain works on contrast. It is far more attentive to differences than similarities. And this becomes an important factor in decision-making where small differences can be overstated.

Part of the problem is that the human mind can only really attend to one thing at a time so to compare two things, we need to think of each individually, which is why choosing from a list of several competing options is often difficult.

Because this becomes complex it makes the decision-making more prone to the intrusion of other biases, like groupthink or the halo effect, where one esteemed person's view is given more, sometimes decisive, weight. This makes decision-making about anything, including your own choices, complicated. You need to ensure that small distinctions are not overvalued and thus have too much weight in your decisions.



I really reject that kind of comparison that says, Oh, he is the best. This is the second best. There is no such thing.

– Mikhail Baryshnikov

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WAYS TO MANAGE THE DISTINCTION BIAS

1.

One way of managing the distinction issue is to compare all options against each other, two at a time. So, if you are considering 4 options consider 1 v 4, 2 v 4, 3 v 4, 1 v 2, 1 v 3, 2 v 3. The number of pairs of options, or dyads, is calculated by the formula, $n \times n-1$ divided by 2.

In the case of 4 options, that would be 4×3 divided by $2 = 6$. This way you have taken the trouble to genuinely compare options against each other, which will give you a better picture of each option's strengths and weaknesses.

2.

Another way of managing the distinction bias is to make a concerted attempt to look at the similarities of compared options. While the natural tendency of the brain will present the differences, take the time and effort to consider in what ways the options are the same or similar.

This will help mitigate the effect of overvalued differences. Making a list of similarities will help keep the differences in proportion rather than being exaggerated.

3.

When differences are observed make every attempt to determine how critical they really are. For example Plan A might be cheaper than Plan B, but Plan B is still within the budget and has other advantages. In other words be specific.

4.

Meditation and mindfulness exercises can make you more aware of how you are consciously comparing two alternatives, potentially minimizing the distinction bias.

The brain works on contrast, seeking out differences that identify different qualities rather than focusing on the similarities. For example, human beings genetically are 99.5% the same, but they are divided by their contrasts, specifically into different races. The color of a person's skin is just one of a huge number of variables, many of which are shared by all human beings. Yet it provides contrast. In doing so, the brain makes us focus on the very small differences rather than the immense similarities.

This tendency to focus on differences rather than similarities can create misperceptions. For example, let's suppose an organization is considering two alternative approaches to solving a problem. When those two alternatives, let us call them Plan A and Plan B, are compared against each other side by side, they will be contrasted and what will emerge are the *differences between them*.

And when compared side by side those differences will likely loom larger than they are. Any similarities will be minimized and the perceived differences exaggerated. Now, if Plans A, B, C, and D are compared it is less likely that the contrasts between plans A and B will be so noticeable. Indeed, one is more likely to see some of their similarities between Plans A and B in relation to Plans C and D.

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The implication of this bias is that when trying to decide alternatives, comparing two plans is likely to lead to an overvaluing of the differences and an undervaluing of the similarities, whereas comparing multiple plans but mitigate that effect.

Whenever we compare two alternatives in anything, the comparison is likely to lead to an exaggeration of contrast and the minimization of similarities.

This *Distinction Bias* will crop up when comparing any two entities. For example, it will emerge when comparing two candidates for the same position or two ad campaigns for the upcoming season.

You will note that in any discussion in which two possibilities are being directly compared with each other, other biases will come into play. For example, if the CEO has a preference, that will influence the perception of the differences, through the *authority bias*.

Having identified the differences between two alternatives, the question then becomes “How do you logically evaluate the significance of the perceived differences?” Perhaps the differences are effectively miniscule and unimportant. For example, you are considering two similarly well qualified candidates for a job. One of the candidates speaks fluent French and German, But how significant is that given the job doesn't really call for the knowledge of foreign languages? Do you use that extra linguistic skill as a marker of better ability, or intelligence, despite any evidence to back up that perception?



The Distinction bias is an ever present trap because we are constantly comparing people, things and possible future actions. Sometimes we are not even aware of the process. In your work life, be mindful of the distinction bias that can artificially create false distinctions between any two compared entities: people, products, services, projects, competition – anything.

The distinction bias is also in play when considering your own behavior. When you are considering two courses of action, how do you compare them? Unquestionably you'll focus on the perceived differences, but how much do those seemingly different courses of action have in common?

Now, that you know about the distinction bias, you hopefully will be more inclined to look for the similarities as well as the differences when comparing any two variables.

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MEDITATION

The problem with comparing two things is that the criteria used for comparison are themselves complex and interdependent. For example, you could compare two alternative marketing programs on the basis of cost, time, energy, manpower, probability of success, ease of implementation, team support, public perception, and many other factors. Even though you might be able to distinguish differences on these separate variables, the interaction between them will complicate the picture even more.

Many times the attempt to compare two entities will be confounded by unknown variables and interactions. We seek division and comparison on the basis of our criteria, and our perception of what performance on those criteria really mean. What about the criteria we haven't measured, or have over- or undervalued?

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Cognitive biases are our way of handling the complexity of life. With wisdom we can get closer to the answers we seek.

Managing cognitive bias doesn't mean we always get to the truth, it just means you move a little closer to it. Be careful that in seeking clarity you don't create false distinctions, or focus on insignificant differences.

In terms of comparing performance of two people, understand that similar results can be produced by two unique individuals, who may share similar qualities but manifest them in their own unique ways.

Always ask yourself the meaning of perceived distinctions. Have you over-valued them? How significant are they really, and on what criteria, via what measurement?

Remember that once you perceive a difference, it becomes your reality, whether it is real or not.

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